



## Lights, Camera, Action!

# Suspenseful reality of Topaz is unsettling

By DAN MERKUR

When Alfred Hitchcock makes a film, it is usually about spying or murder or both. And when Alfred Hitchcock makes a film, it is similar but still quite unlike anything he or anyone else has ever done.

The reception of Topaz has ranged widely, from people expecting him to make a thriller more disgusting than The Birds or more frightening than Psycho, from people expecting a heavy mystery-suspense film like Rear Window or Dial M for Murder, and from people who never know what to expect from the master of suspense. The last group found the film exciting, different, and very, very good. The first two found Topaz a disappointment.

In 1935, Hitchcock made a film called The 39 Steps, following the adventures of Robert Donat who accidentally stumbles onto a spy ring, and how he goes about exposing it. Topaz follows the disintegration of another spy ring, but this time Hitchcock places his attention on the network, and watches it crumble through the efforts of many, mostly unrelated individuals, instead of following the adventures of the guiding light that rips it apart.

Perhaps the impersonality of Topaz' approach was a mistake on Hitchcock's part — it is easier to become engrossed in a man than in a scheme, but Topaz was adapted from Leon Uris' mostly non-

fictional account of how the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was discovered. The 39 Steps was originally an adventure novel by John Buchan.

What the impersonality of Topaz gains, then, is the phenomenal impact of reality, which when depicted by Hitchcock is not inconsiderable.

I didn't like the color quality of the film, because the color was too real. It was unsettlingly real. It kept bringing home the enormity of the reality of the story. It was easy

in watching the black and white The 39 Steps just to enjoy the fiction and still leave the theatre smiling, but with Topaz I left the theatre uneasy because of the importance of the story. And the color made the impact all that much more powerful.

Perhaps Topaz is Hitchcock's ultimate triumph. Not only is the film as a film suspenseful, but when you leave the theatre the themes are too unsettling to be forgotten easily.

As always, the direction is first-rate, the cutting is virtually faultless, the script very literate, the acting, very good, and the music is just right. I did find the composition slightly under par. For Hitchcock.

Visually, Topaz is not as aesthetically pleasing as one generally expects of Hitchcock. But then again, I suspect this may have been purposeful.

There is an element in Topaz that is slightly documentary-like. Of course Hitchcock's camera is highly stylized, but it is quite possible to stylistically create a mood in the audience that is similar to the mood a documentary creates. Once again, the realism of Hitchcock's approach is frightening.

I enjoyed Topaz more than most films of recent years. Perhaps they do still make 'em like they used to. But maybe you had to be around way back when to learn how.



Intelligence agent Frederick Stafford confers with Michael Piccoli and John Van Dreelen in a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's spy thriller Topaz

### A strong little film

## John and Mary: immaculately conceived

By LLOYD CHESLEY

I couldn't resist that pun in the headline, but the point is that this is a strong little film, that flourishes because of an intelligent outlook.

In the 50's Paddy Chayefsky wrote a landmark drama called Marty, important because it dealt directly with the problems of common human beings, in this case an overweight butcher.

John and Mary serves the same function in 1969 or '70. Its protagonists are intelligent young people. It wasn't to be a story about the disturbed or ugly ducklings, just about real people, as they used to say. It was carefully planned to avoid making them special cases by making their backgrounds overly bizarre. His mother was lost

among the lost causes she worked for, but this only serves to soften the effect of his selfishness, which is no greater than any of us have.

Neither are virgins, but then neither was raped. Their past affairs were with simple people like themselves, not with villains or perverts, and these relationships did not end in torment, they just ended. It is, all in all, a film out to find the drama in real life. Had it not done so it would have been a bore. As it is, it is very entertaining.

It has nice doses of drama and humor. We hear their thoughts as they play the "seduction game," and, nicely timed, these give some good laughs. At the same time we are let in to their feelings so that they become meaningful people to us.

There is a touch of Charlie Chaplin in all this, that mixture of humor and pathos that is his genius, except that here there is not so much humor, nor so much pathos. But it is a blend of both, and a good blend, that makes the film work.

Between the script and the film came hard work by the director and his stars, for it is a simple script that needs strong work to blow life into its plain, somewhat Hemingway-like construction.

When Dustin Hoffman played The Graduate, everyone loved him, but with the reservation that he was "only playing himself." In Midnight Cowboy he startled everyone by playing a totally opposite type. It seemed he was an actor. But the change required no subtlety on his part so it may have been easier than it looked.

As John he is the stereotype of The Graduate become human. In many ways, for its controlled, natural presentation, it is his best, probably most difficult performance. He was both very identifiable, and an individual.

Mia Farrow has never shown such charm. She's a gentle sort, but she can get mad and she can be a lot of fun. She isn't tragic and she isn't a kook. Like Hoffman she is very controlled and very good.

It is hard to imagine this story of typical Americans coming from an Englishman known for his works with spies (remember Danger Man, or Secret Agent on TV) and cops who live in violence (Bullit).

Perhaps his detachment as an outsider helped him get the reality he has, but he did so with great compassion.

Like many directors today, his composition leaves something to be desired, but he can place a camera to catch the action with the proper force. He obviously handled his actors well, and as his English sense of humour becomes tempered by his new Americanization, it creates a mixture that can be a lot of fun.

I might say that as a new director he has started strongly and shows promise, but the tragic fact of the film industry is that although he is a new director, he is 40 years old. Youth is not a cornerstone of behind the scenes as it seems to be in front of the scenery in the themes and subjects getting treatment in movies these days. But after the appalling short from the McMaster Film Board that accompanies the film, I can see why Hollywood is reluctant to give youth a chance.

The most difficult drama to find is the drama of real people, simply because it is commonplace. To entertain on this basis and to present some good performances is a worthy accomplishment that makes John and Mary something good.

## Dream of Kings is as enjoyable as a dozen other neat little films

By JIM PURDY

Henry Mark Petrarkis wrote a nice little novel about a Greek living in a modern U.S. city. The screen rights were sold and the decision made to transform the book into a film.

Movie craftsmen gathered to perform their required duties. Petrarkis helped deliver the screenplay to the director who worked with his crew of cameramen and technicians and his actors. He delivered the exposed film to the editor who dutifully turned out a final cut while musicians worked in association with him to produce a synchronized score. Each technician and craftsman performed his particular task with the thoroughness of all union members.

There are only a few flaws: the lab failed to maintain complete colour consistency and one close-up of Anthony Quinn in the bank is taken from such a great distance with such an inadequate lens that the picture is hardly visible through the grain. But generally the film meets the normal technical and aesthetic standards.

There is nothing particularly original, but then the business-like mentality of its makers merely strives to maintain its assembly-line level. The theme is handled adequately with the melodramatic cliches not too overbearing to accept. The character relationships are satisfactorily developed by actors and camera work.

Anthony Quinn has long made a career out of playing Indians, Mexicans, and Italians, usually in supporting roles. With the advent of the anti-hero, the underdog and the common man in the films of the late 50's and 60's,

Quinn could take on lead roles while still playing basically the same character. Greeks particularly became his forte, pinnacing his career with Zorba the Greek.

As in his former roles, Quinn in A Dream of Kings is the big lovable guy with vast capacity for a lusty life and a hearty laugh.

Masoukas is a Chicago Greek identifying with the gods and heroes of his heritage.

His ingratiating personality and winning charm keep him in friends and glory, while his wife struggles to keep his family alive. He wins over a baker's widow by selling her life, light and reality and he perseveres in selling life to his dying son by taking him back to his roots, the sun of Greece.

But reality temporarily overtakes him, forcing him to destroy his dignity by cheating at craps to try to raise the money.

Everyone fails him but the wife he has always failed who steals her mother's life insurance money. Battered, bruised and broke, with a dying son beside him, Masoukas laughs at death and failure, still floating in the clouds and dreaming of kings, making life not just bearable but enjoyable.

The film itself is vaguely enjoyable, in the same way as a dozen other neat little films, turned out by a dozen other film technicians belonging to the same unions and following the same standards. Its success will be modest; it will make a profit and satisfy the status quo, but it will also be entirely forgotten five minutes after leaving the theatre.